



Dear Friends:

The afternoon of July 23 was a real scorcher in Helena. My wife Mary and I were sipping a cool one in the shade of our deck when we both noticed a plume of smoke towards the east, out by Canyon Ferry Lake. We now know that we were witnessing the first major incident of this year's unprecedented fire season. At our July 24 staff meeting, the Travel Montana team finalized our strategy on how we would handle the fire situation. Experience with other similar fire events in 1988 and 1994 had taught us that the best use of our resources is to provide timely and accurate information to the traveling public, Montana citizens and the media. A fire season presents a number of challenging dilemmas. Events and conditions change rapidly, rumors get started and are blown out of proportion. Beginning in early August, Montana became the lead story and focal point for news media from around the world. In their eyes, the story was "Montana on Fire!" We've learned long ago that we can't control how the media reports on events in our state. We reasoned that if we could get people to our site, we would be able to present a realistic view of the events unfolding in our state. We alerted the media and other state agencies about the site. By all indications, this strategy seems to be working. Traffic to the site has increased beyond our wildest expectations. We had been averaging about 3,900 user sessions per day before the fires. For the last week ending August 19, we averaged 7,800 sessions, over 10 minutes in length. On August 10, our usage spiked to over 11,000 sessions. People want information, and they want it now. I know that many of you have used the site or referred folks to it. Thanks, and keep it up!

Our website has given us the opportunity to report on the events unfolding in Montana from the perspective of a potential visitor. Think about it...if you were planning on visiting Montana over the next few weeks, wouldn't you want to know what's going on? We've been able to accurately portray the scale and impact of the fires on our communities on a real-time basis. Armed with up-to-the-minute information, the consumer can make an informed decision. As tragic as these fires have been, the fact remains that Montana is a big state (93 million acres), and there are still many wonderful places to explore, attractions and events to experience and museums to discover. We've done countless media interviews with regional and national press to try and get our message across. We have begun to emphasize activities and events that people can participate in during the fall in Montana, and we have started looking at both short- and long-term strategies to try and minimize the impact on the tourism-related businesses.

In the meantime, we need to keep our message in front of people as best we can. We will continue to utilize the internet in innovative ways. We will be mounting a public relations campaign, utilizing video news releases and interviews to spread the word that even during these trying times, Montana still has much to offer. Autumn is a magical time in Big Sky Country, and we'll do everything we can to communicate that message loud and clear. I've spoken to a number of "veterans" who were in the travel industry during the fires of 1988. Their experiences are worth sharing. At that time, many felt that it would take years for visitation to recover in Yellowstone and the state. What they found is that Mother Nature's process of regeneration and rebirth was a sight to behold...and the visitors returned.

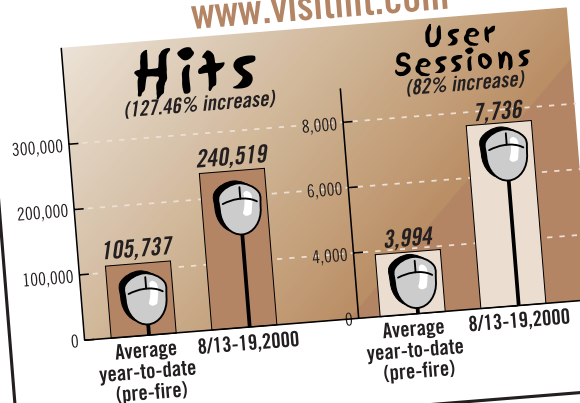
We know that some individuals and businesses will be seriously impacted by this year's fires. In no way are we minimizing their losses; however, we know that Montanans are strong willed and determined. Throughout our history we have shown the ability to bounce back from adversity and to meet challenges head on.

I'd like to thank all of you in the tourism industry who have worked so hard to keep the lines of communication open during these difficult times. Experience has taught me that people in tourism are resourceful and resilient. Your help and support is greatly appreciated by all of us here at Travel Montana.

Sincerely,

*Matthew T. Cohn*  
Matthew T. Cohn  
Director, Travel Montana

Comparison of traffic on Travel Montana's website during fire activity  
[www.visitmt.com](http://www.visitmt.com)



## Call Center Eases Travelers' Minds

Travel Montana's travel inquiry center, 1-800-VISITMT, began operating 7 days a week on Saturday, August 19. Normally at this time of the year, the call center is open Monday through Friday. According to Jim McGowan, Tourism Service Manager for the center, a number of calls that have come in have been misconceptions about Glacier and Yellowstone Parks being closed. The travel counselors have also fielded questions about road and forest closures, air quality issues and general travel to the state in the coming months. McGowan says the counselors handled 608 fire inquiries during the week of August 14-18, with 208 of these calls answered on Friday, August 18. These fire inquiries are on top of the average 200 daily calls the counselors already answer for this time of the year.

"I think the ability for visitors to actually talk to a human being has helped ease their minds and dispel some of the myths surrounding the fires. I believe many of those who have called may have cancelled their travel plans to the state, but our counselors were able to give them alternative travel itineraries so they could have a wonderful visit." The call center will continue to operate 7 days a week until the fire situation cools down. Call center hours are 7 a.m. - 6 p.m. Monday through Friday, and 8 a.m. - 4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

## Fires Hit Home

The reality of these fires is that they touch many of those around us. We would like to share

this letter which Travel Montana's Rachel Zeigler received from TAC member Kelly Flynn.

Dear Rachel,

I'm sorry I am not going to be able to make it to the TAC meeting in October despite earlier plans to be there. The fire in our area has devastated our ranch leaving us without pasture for our cattle, cancellations from our summer guests, destruction of a huge amount of our fences, and delay of the hunting season thus losing even more clients. On top of it all, while gathering our cattle today, my brother's wife's horse fell in a creek and rolled and stomped her thus causing a broken leg and head injury. Quite frankly, things should be better tomorrow 'cause they aren't that great today. Please pass this message on to Matthew. Rachel, if I have any chance to host guests or work cattle in the October timeframe, I simply will have to work. Life provides some interesting moments. Some really hurt. Have a nice meeting! I will miss not being there.

Kelly

The staff at Travel Montana sends our thoughts and prayers out to Kelly and all others affected by the fires.

## Mark Your Calendar Second Lewis and Clark Conference Set

"The Countdown Continues—Plans, Preparations and Programs" is the theme for Montana's second annual Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Conference slated for October 5-6

at the Holiday Inn in Great Falls. Conference registration is \$75 prior to September 27, \$90 after that time. For more information contact Premier Planning at 406-442-4141. A complete conference agenda can be viewed on the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Commission's website, [www.montanalewisandclark.org](http://www.montanalewisandclark.org) under what's new.

## Media Tours Postponed

The Publicity Office and Yellowstone, Russell and Gold West Countries have postponed three media tours due to fire-related concerns. "The Clark on the Yellowstone" tour, August 26-31, the "Women's Adventure" tour, September 6-12 and "Satin & Blue Jeans Wedding" tour, September 16-21 will all be rescheduled in 2001.

## Calendar of Events

### September

- 5-8 Affordable Meetings, Baltimore
- 16-24 Pioneer Club Fam (UK travel agents)
- 20-24 "Flathead Lake" media tour, FCVB
- 22-29 Group Tour Fam

### October

- 2-3 Tourism Advisory Council, Sidney
- 2-6 "Mountain Bike" media tour, Yellowstone Country, West Yellowstone and Big Sky
- 5-6 L&C Bicentennial Commission Planning Conference, Great Falls
- 10-13 Incentive Travel & Meeting Execs, Chicago

For all of the latest Montana tourism industry information log on to Travel Montana's Intranet site: [travelmontana.state.mt.us](http://travelmontana.state.mt.us).

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